A black and white illustration featuring a classic street lamp in the center. The lamp has a decorative, multi-faceted glass enclosure and a small flame-like finial on top. It is mounted on a dark, textured pole. To the right of the lamp is a large, detailed tree trunk with prominent vertical bark ridges. In the upper left, the dark, leafy canopy of a tree is visible against a light background. The overall style is graphic and artistic.

Prism



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Prism



2017

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Her Blatant Paradigm

Taylor Sferrazza

Allegorically wrest away before her time,
 she couldn't whisper any imprudent goodbye.
 She was still existent, but a blatant paradigm;
 only serving as a waste of time,
 a degenerate mime.

In the hoax espionage of her pantomime,
 her "crowd"? Wistless as today's downtime;
 incapable of any engaging pastime.
 They were no more than hapless grime;
 Exceedingly less esteemed than lime.
 So she did indeed commit a vital crime,
 by tolerating the putrescence of her prime.

The Prayer

Alex Van Meir

God I know I don't talk to you a lot.
 I promise I won't bother you for long.
 I won't ask you for much.

All that I ask is you keep her safe.
 Whoever she is.
 Wherever she is.

Be there for her when she's shrouded in darkness.
 Make her laugh when she wants to cry. And if she does
 make sure to dry her eyes. Bring her joy in little moments.
 Give her strength to move forward when life gets hard.
 Help mold her for me the way you're molding me. That
 way when we meet we will both be ready to start our
 journey together.

The Butterfly and the Moth

Rachael Thomas

The body and mind are a mystery
 For all flesh has a mixed history
 People ponder these inquiries as they gaze
 At the butterfly and the moth is a daze
 The butterfly sits calmly on their hand
 Its tiny legs so soft, unlike coarse sand
 As it flies over the constant trouble
 It spreads its wings of a beautiful angel
 Bringing the warmth and the bliss
 Of a life that nobody should miss
 These pint-sized saviors care for the hurt
 Leading them up and away from the cold dirt
 These tender creatures are so pure
 Don't hurt their fragile wings for sure
 Opposite is the moth, who appears at dusk
 When they land, it may make someone's skin feel husk
 With big eyes that cause trepidation
 Such horrors were not meant for creation
 They are little demons of deceit
 Making falsehood appear oh so sweet
 Drawn to light, wanting it all for their own
 Eating away the brightness to the bone
 They only cause sickness within
 Yet, many crave these awful sins
 Slowly, the two settle on a human's shoulders
 The stress they carry is heavy, like large boulders
 Why are there two, people may question
 One will become their true confession
 Both are present, creating a hybrid
 Yet to humans, only one is avid
 The goodness of the butterfly may win
 Or the moth, with temptations of sin
 Stitched in the fabric is the light and the dark
 But the chosen path is where they leave their mark



Cherry Tree

Davis Felts

My feet paced across the auburn, dust filled carpet as the
feet of pursuers drug across the floor, just behind me.
Layers of wrinkled skin rotted on the predators just like
the mold that grew out of the baseboards creeping up the
sides, decomposing the layers of sheet rock.

The stench from the death of their own insides massacred
my nostrils. The swell of the smell was so pungent that my
eyes rolled back as if to try and evade the haze
of punishment. The fear of being caught made my heart
pound as beads of sweat fell to the floor leaving a trail of
precipitated fear to follow me.

If they caught me their nails would dig into my skin,
pulling it apart piece by piece, like putty in their fingers.
Their moans roared in my ears, quivering my spine,
causing me to fall to my knees. The bones in my legs felt
like tree trunks deeply rooted in the flooring not allowing
me to continue forward.

Fear uprooted me;
cutting the roots like axes, and propelling all of my weight
forward. They were breathing down the back my neck
now, closing in on me. For something almost too blind to
see they sensed very easily where I was.

After barely escaping their claws with just a scratch,
another time the exit was finally in sight. Looking back
one last time I saw their half smiling mouths appear to be
sad to see me go. Their wrinkled hands grabbed at me one
more time, trying to pull me back, but I was gone, I had
successfully escaped Cherry Tree:
Home for the elderly.



Cherry Blossoms

Alex Van Meir

You're not here.

You aren't here to hear this.

This poem I've been writing for you all this time.
Back then I thought you would've been here.
You should be here. But you're not. And I'm losing you.
Your smile. Your laugh. Even your face escapes me.
But there are things I cannot forget.
Like the way you saw the world. How there is beauty
hidden in every crevice. You guided me towards it.
But without you here I can't seem to find it.
Maybe one day I will see it again.
But until then I will just sit here under this tree.
Waiting for the cherry blossoms to bloom.

Children of Copper

Will Hall

Nothing has changed

I went thousands of miles
 hiked a mountain of faces
 broke the barrier of white mist
 and buried myself in mysterious places
 yet here I've returned
 to home and children of copper
 told they're gold and tricked into trying
 to dive deeper than Atlantis
 and pluck from the mouths of clams
 a hope that they may also
 go where I have gone
 and be who I have been
 yet here I am
 and nothing has changed.

Weary Soul and a Life Lived

Will Hall

It's all been said, written. The stories about beautiful girls
 with black hair and blue eyes. Poems told through the
 eyes of war veterans or grieving widows. Tales of victory,
 strength, loss, loneliness and triumph. Yet we keep
 churning out more, the same, told different ways.

New kids learning the same mistakes, dictators voted
 to positions of power, death at the hands of religion.
 Screaming bands of anarchy hate suffering slated to the
 tune of a young girl being told she is not pretty enough
 for fame. Puke covered bathroom stalls and drug dealing
 infants. Yet here I sit trying to come up with a new way
 to say something old, that old men had known hundreds
 of years before I got the chance. It is pointless, childish,
 directionless, useless and I am lost in it.

My mother told me I could do anything I wanted to,
 but what I want is to matter, and that ship sailed the day
 Rome fell. Soon the bombs will fly and it will be proven
 that we are a species doomed to repeat. It would be a
 blessing at this point to get zapped into the ever-loving by
 an alien race.

At least that would break the cycle of hubris masked
 egotistical monstrous insult flinging hate mongering racist
 inferiority inducing stupidity
 that we have deemed fit to exist.

I am on a hamster wheel of unimportance until I wake up
 one day with a lump in my lungs, and weeks left to prove
 life is worth it.

The Weaver
 Evangeline Lubak

Spin,
 Spin,
 Spin,

The twine twirls,
 One thread joins with two,
 The chord of life grows.
 Spin, Spin, Spin,
 The thread so strong,
 So fresh, so vibrant with colors of spring,
 The dance has begun.
 Prance on tiny feet as they learn
 Of steps and running, jumping.
 Spin, Spin, Spin,
 Yarn pulling tighter,
 Threads join together,

Wisdom of years makes them stronger,
 Stops their quiver.
 Twirl faster, the dance races on,
 No time to wait,
 Youth is fleeting.
 Spin, Spin, Spin,
 Winding reverses,
 The chord begins to fray,
 Summer is leaving, taking its hues of passion,
 Leaving solace.
 The world continues to wind up,
 The dance must go on, even as the thread unravels.
 Spin, Spin, Spin,
 Age is a cruel thing, Time a bandit.
 The thread is no longer many but one,
 Pulled by trial and failure.
 Frayed and dull, yet she twirls on,
 Never mind that the dance has reached its final steps
 Frail and grey, the twine is pulled one last time

Spin...

Spin.....

Spin-

The thread snaps

The Place We Call Home

Lauren Lane

Welcome to the society of the world,
Hope that you will enjoy your stay,
You're free to express yourself,
A lie told to us every day,
You can express yourself,
If it is only in the right way,
We are taught to love our bodies,
Just not too much,
Because this world tears down what is built up so high,
This I cannot deny,
We are taught that being different isn't all that bad,
Till we grow up and have to tell our problems
to someone with a notepad,
We beat on you for smiling,
And then wonder what is wrong,
When this fragile person is frowning,
And feeling all alone,
This world tells you that you're worthless,
Till the depression of the world
becomes ceaseless in your mind,
And you become so overwhelmed
that there is no place to run or hide,
That you shouldn't speak out,
That you should just sit down,
That you should cry with the others,
While silently be buried under the ground,
And love is a matter of opinion
and something of your own free will,
As long as it matches with whomever we choose
and will not be someone who can't fulfill,
And we let you have your opinions,
As long as they fit our views,
Welcome to this wonderful world of society,
We promise not to deceive,
And once you are born into this world,
There's only one way to leave...



A Witness to Alzheimer

Nathan Clapsaddle

I remember waiting with anticipation to go to grandma's house.
She could cook a meal that lasted for hours.
We could sit around eating eggrolls and laughing.
She taught me to eat with chopsticks.
We would go to church on Sundays,
And enjoy each other's company.

Now I look back fondly at those memories wishing for a moment more,
But her mind vanishes more as the days pass.
She stares off into the distance grasping at memories,
But I know they are only fragments of what they once were.
Now I have to help her remember her history,
So she can feel a little bit more comfortable in her own head.

It pains me that I now dread the present.
I don't always want to be there to take care of her like she did for me,
But what is happening to her is scaring me.
I fear it will happen to me in my future.
So I must gather myself to love her,
Even if she will forget me in the coming days.

Untitled

Michael Marsh

Expectations, like expectorations,
 Cling to me like the expiration dates
 On broken beer bottles basking in the grass,
 Past lives tossed away in a haze,
 Of life unfettered by faith, reason, companionship?

Old souls from a time of no holds barred,
 Wastelands scarred with the marks
 Of living things thrown away to rot,
 Sold and bought, machinations
 Of mechanism, technology to be
 God, new and old, a birth from
 The flawed colossus of man's civilization,
 Falling to rise to fall

Anew, melting pot becomes cesspool becomes stew,
 Of the bones of the few, to feed the many,
 Steadfast in the will to outlast
 All manner of new beginnings,
 History, but a footnote of an underpinning,
 A ruthless drive to continue winning,
 Whether or not we are lost in the process,
 Illusions of progress dauntless
 Compared to the evolution of unkindness.

The Lady and the Tiger

Jesslyn Thomas

Once upon a time in a place far away
Where the land is fresh and unicorns play
And everyone lives in joy and peace
With beautiful houses and prize-winning geese
Lived the ruler of the village, mean King Eric
With his beautiful daughter and sorcerer, Merric.

Old King Eric was cruel and greedy
Without a thought for the poor and needy
He took all their money, and then took some more
And so the rich people quickly turned poor
The news of this wrong traveled far and wide
“Something’s got to be done!” the villagers cried.



Along came a Prince from another land
 He had heard of the problem, and lent a hand
 Their plan was simple, easy as pie
 They'd attack the castle when the moon was high
 The Princess found out, knowing this was not right
 So she readied her soldiers to attack and to fight.

The castle was ready when the villagers came
 The soldiers rushed out, ready for fame
 For whoever caught the Prince in this attack
 Would be given a reward
 when the Prince was brought back
 Then lo-and-behold the brave Prince was caught
 Going back to the palace he struggled and fought.

And that's when they met, it was love at first sight
 The Prince and the Princess just knew it was right
 But alas it was wrong, their love could not be
 The Prince was her father's sworn enemy.
 They threw him in jail, right there on the spot
 But stay away from each other they could not.

The Prince was taken to the dungeon deep
 The Princess came to see him when the castle was asleep
 The Queen discovered their secret bliss
 And said, "I'm not putting up with this!"
 She told the King, who in one breath
 Sentenced the luckless Prince to death.

The Princess couldn't stop her aching
 And feared her tender heart was breaking
 She wept all day in fear and sorrow
 Her beloved Prince would die tomorrow
 She pleaded with her father the whole long day
 And at last they found another way.

Before the Prince stood two doors
 The King called out, "The choice is yours!
 But choose it wisely for this may be
 The very last day you shall ever see."

Behind one door a tiger waited
 A gruesome and painful death was fated
 A new bride for him behind the other
 Oh, how he cursed the Princess's mother
 No matter which door the Prince would choose
 He and his Princess both would lose.

The Prince gazed up at his love with a heavy heart
 Whatever happened, they'd still be apart
 And that's when he saw it, a hint he would think
 The flick of her finger and quick little wink
 And out of the door came

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

For Passion
Anonymous

There once was a flower

With petals of blue

In a field of yellow

A sadder hue

A dark violet blossom

With more passion than blue

As blue began to grow

It surely came to know

That violet had been waving to and fro

So surely blue did climb

As it stretched across time

It saw violet had become a crime

The depth of its beauty

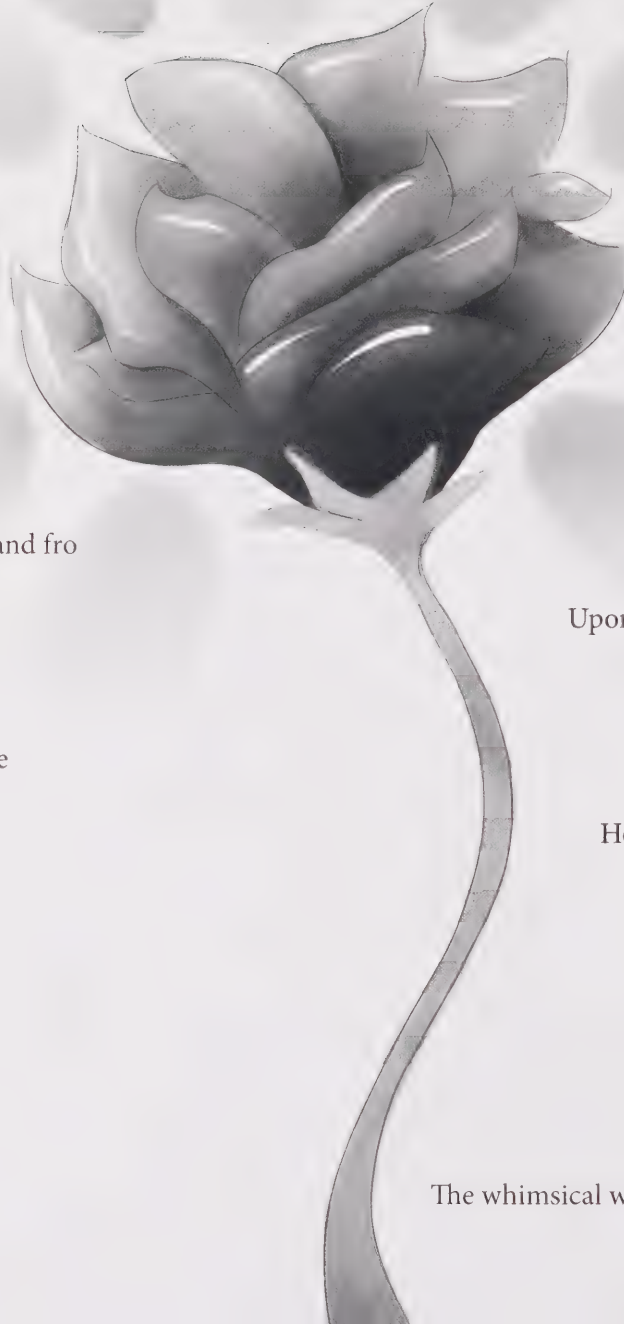
Its purpose and its duty

Was to grow and surpass

This quiet yellow mass

Now much to blue's dismay

Violet wanted to stay



Violet had been dancing

Without delay

Blue hadn't seen

The places in between

Just the violet passion

That flowed like liquid satin

The yellow took a step aside

It leans and preens but does not hide

Upon the ocean of yellow that blue did ride

Face to face blue could see

Violet was a dried blue mystery

How it danced and danced so vigorously

But had ceased to persist with dignity

What blue saw was a memory

Of the violet flower he once had

The blue flower he is

The whimsical withered wonder that he would become

Ohana
Davis Felts

On average sex lasts 5 minutes and 25 seconds

Contrary to what men claim about their affections.

With hundreds of contraceptives

It wouldn't take a team of detectives

To find a way to be careful

Sure I get it, he hits you with a hair pull,

Grabs your thighs

And you sink into his eyes

One thing leads to another

You lose yourselves under the covers.

5 minutes and 25 seconds a minimal fraction of a year

5 minutes and 25 seconds is what got me here.

I can imagine your hands shaking as you saw the results

Your stomach a storm and I was baby Zeus

with a rattle made of thunder bolts.

But I was no God given present

You were a king and queen forced with

the abandoned child of a peasant

I guess nine months was too many.

I was born healthy, not fragile and skinny.

Maybe you thought if I was alive,

You wouldn't be allowed to live.

Maybe you feared the wrath,

Of your son the psychopath

That I'd release on the two of you

As you tried to tell me what to do.

Or maybe I wouldn't grow up to be manly,

I could be a coward who turns his back on his family

Who takes his mistakes and hides them away,

Or finds the nearest person and gives them away.

Yeah, what kind of man would that be,

Hell I'd even get rid of those versions of me.

But if one man's trash is another's treasure,

Then someone would take me with pleasure.

Someone would hold me when I cry,

Tears choking back questions of why

Did I kick too much and keep you up all night?

Because a mother would never sleep

until her's were alright.

What did I do to cause such pain?

How long was it before you couldn't refrain,

From having to say

Someone take this demon away.

How long before I became worthless, 9 months?

Because it was ten years when I first felt this brokenness.

I was torn to pieces.

I was even speechless

Because the first person with a choice,

Decided they didn't want to hear my voice.

I'm sure the toughest part on you,

Knowing there was a better two.

Knowing your heart wasn't enough,

Knowing you two weren't half as tough,

Knowing teach me to ride a bike

Knowing they'd tuck me in at night,

Knowing they'd show me the colors of the rainbow

Knowing they'd teach me about love,

Knowing they'd teach me

what the definition of family really is.

But I'm okay with that,

Your definition is pretty fucked up.

Lost and Found

Taylor Sferrazza

It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
It just seems like it is always falling apart

'Round and 'round I go again
Like this whole thing was a game of "Let's play pretend"
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
They are all staring with blank faces

'Round and 'round I go again
I feel like I can't be myself again
Be strong for them or it all will end
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
I am shaking and can't breathe again

'Round and 'round I go again
I am numb and broken in this game of pretend
It seems I am only talking to myself again
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
I know I am not alone... I know I am not alone
I have to tell myself over and over again
I feel like I am lying to myself, convincing myself.

'Round and 'round I go again.
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
They have all given up and thrown it out
What was dearest to them has dwindled out
What they cared about was carved out
Seems like hatred and sorrow have won this bout

'Round and 'round I go again
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
I was found and now I am lost
I know I am not alone... I know I am not alone
I might be lying to myself
I have to be strong for myself
Am I able to do that for myself?
But even then I might be lying to myself.
'Round and round I go again.
It all just seems like a game of lost and found
In this cycle of a game that seems to never end.

Again.

I want to believe in impossible things,
That maybe the world isn't such a bad place,
That there is still good left out there.

But all I can see is the hatred,
Where people hurl insults like rocks,
And there is no sense of peace in the world.

I want to know that my family will be safe,
That we can come home at the end of the day,
That we can enjoy being around each other.

But my father works too hard to make ends meet,
He hasn't lived at home in many years,
And weekends are the only time we interact.

I want to live without the presence of fear,
That who I love won't matter to others,
That I can finally walk down the street holding hands.

But I have been attacked before,
And I live in fear of it happening again,
And though I can marry, I am second class.

I want to walk with my head upright,
That I can be proud of who I am, what I am,
That others will stand up and be proud with me.

But I hold my head in shame every day,
And walk with the weight of my actions
holding me down,
And lock myself away to avoid disappointing others.

I want the world to be a happy place,
That treats others with respect and kindness,
That doesn't need to tear others apart.

But I see how the world truly is,
With all of its pain and turmoil,
And those of us torn down left wanting.

Wanting

Nathan Clapsaddle

Years

Shelby Lombardo

1940

The year is 1940.

It is a reasonably warm July day in Lancaster, PA, but the rooms in the hospital are frigid. Despite this, Ana's face is washed in sweat; her once curled blonde tendrils limp against the side of her neck. It is her fourth child. A tall, shabby man named Nick paces back and forth alongside Ana's bed.

I do wish she would hurry along; we could do with the bed. The nurses whisper amongst themselves as they pass each other in the wings, overworked and weary. Ana is afforded less of their time than the others; even the small act of checking her vitals seems to be rushed. Of course, the hospital is familiar with the family and its dreadful poverty. As with the other three births, there will be no payment.

Finally, there is a baby girl. Lily Mae, they name her. Nick, now sanguine and believing his job to be done, heads to the bar for a celebratory indulgence. Ana holds her fourth child, watching the soft rise of the infant's chest. She remembers the first time she ever held a baby; age seven, on the steamship from Helsinki to New York. The child was just a few weeks old, a distant cousin's newborn, and scared of the loud clanking noises that were emitted from the pipes on the boat. The baby had cried and cried in Ana's arms while his mother struggled to find a blanket.

Lily Mae is quiet. She has no knowledge of the steamer, of the toss of the waves or the rattling of the metal walls. She hasn't felt the caustic sting of a pair of eyes that condemns the arrival of her very existence. No one has scoffed at her accent, or seemed repulsed by the confusion her parents exude.

Ana gently touches the top of Lily's hair with her lips. 27, dirt poor, and now with four children, Ana passes on the same promise to Lily as she did her first three.

"You will have everything."

1947

The year is 1947.

Lily and Joan sit on the front-porch of the dilapidated wooden house, playing with a hand-me-down paper doll set. Joan, the eldest of the four Mueller children, is usually given the task of watching over her baby sister. She doesn't mind; at twelve years old Joan has already been taking care of her siblings for a while.

Lily looks up at Joan, her blue eyes squinting against the sunlight. Despite the five-year age difference, the sisters are close, and Lily often consults Joan if their mother isn't available for questioning.

"Joan, I heard Mrs. Myer say to Mrs. Hart that our daddy is a lush. What's a lush?" Joan doesn't immediately look at Lily, instead scraping the dusty floorboards with the tip of her shoe. Mrs. Myer and Mrs. Hart are two of their elderly neighbors who often invite the Mueller children inside their homes after school for a cookie or drink.

"Don't worry about it Lily," Joan sniffs, scratching at the crook of her arm. "Those gals are just two old fuddy-duddies." Lily blinks once, nods as if in understanding, and then,

"What's a fuddy-duddy?" Joan giggles, and after a moment, Lily joins in, if only to be in on a joke she doesn't understand. The moment is shattered by the sound of splintering wood and muffled yelling. Lily darts toward the sound, which resonates from the kitchen, even while Joan grasps at her arm.

In the kitchen, two chairs, or what were once chairs, lie crumbled across the floor. Her mother sits in one of the remaining chairs, as still as an animal of prey, blood dripping from her nose. Already a bruise is beginning to form against the hollow of her cheek. Nick stands in the center of the kitchen, blood scattered on his hands. Whether this is from Ana's face or splintered wood is impossible to tell. His clothes, which were nicely pressed for work that morning, are now rumpled and stained.

"You bitch, you bitch...I should, I should just..." The words tumble out of his mouth as he sways back and forth. In his left hand he holds the drink, the one he promised he wouldn't drink anymore. Lily doesn't know what the drink is; just that her mother hates it and it makes her father angry.

"Daddy?" Lily's small voice issues from the doorframe. Joan tugs at the sleeve of Lily's dress. She knows it isn't safe to be here. Nick doesn't turn to his children; he just keeps rocking back and forth on his heels. Lily thinks she might now understand what a lush is.

1963

The year is 1963.

Lily has been convinced by her friend Margaret to go to a bar. We won't stay long. Margaret had promised, seeing the hesitation on Lily's face. Lily knew that there were lots of young soldiers in town, so she played along, fully intending to leave after an hour or two.

The bar is packed, especially with young men in uniform. Lily positions herself in the corner of the room to wait while Margaret meets nearly every soldier. She isn't expecting to be intrigued by anyone until she sees him. He's in a uniform with a small group of officers. He's handsome in a quiet sort of way, with dark eyes and an Italian complexion. However, it's not his looks that capture her attention, for there are probably several other men who are taller or more striking. It's the way he watches the room with a cautious eye, like he has seen all the atrocities the world has to offer and still found something worth living for.

Margaret comes back from her tour of the room to find Lily still watching the man.

"Oh Lily darling, whatever or whomever are you staring at?" Margaret teases. Lily blushes, but points out the man to her friend. Margaret grasps Lily by the shoulders.

"Oh! That's Michael. He's Sam's friend, just a few years older than us. Want me to ask Sam to introduce you?" Lily nods, then,

"Yes, I guess you'd better introduce me to the man I'm going to marry."

1966

The year is 1966.

Snow pelts the window of the police car, emphasizing the red and blue lights that dance across Lily's face. Next to her, Michael's face is panic-stricken as he begs with the officer. Please sir, please.

Lily folds her hands over the center of her swollen belly, grimacing against the contractions, and willing the car to move faster. She does not want to have this baby on the highway.

At the hospital, a nurse frantically gets Lily into a bed, remarking that she is likely only minutes away. One of the nurses, seeing the trepidation on Michael's face, approaches him.

"You know honey, a lot of husbands just sit in the waiting room until it's done. We can come get you when the baby's all cleaned up." The corners of his mouth quiver as he frowns at the nurse.

"Ma'am, that's my wife and my baby. I'm staying right here." And he does. He stays until finally, like twenty-six years ago, there is a baby girl. They name her Maria. Michael intermittently admires his baby girl and wife before falling asleep in the chair beside them. Lily holds her first-born against her chest, remembering how her own mother would recall the day she was born.

She remembers playing with Joan near the creek, though they were told not to. Once, she fell in, and nearly died because she didn't know how to swim. She remembers the whispers about her father, the shame of being associated with a drunk, and the guilt in her heart for still loving him. She remembers the light leaving her mother's eyes, year after year, until there was nothing but a shell left. There is the first taste of the drink, and the fear and realization that she could become her father. But she also remembers falling in love.

Lily holds her daughter close, hoping that this moment will be the start of something new that she will remember. To her, she promises,

"You will have everything."

Funeral at Olitas'

Starlina Rose

Olita's house was surreal and fuzzy, full of old Persian carpets, layered upon each other over the oak wood floor like the memories of past funerals. The walls and corner tables were stacked with time-wracked silver, and the scent of apples and old grease wafted from the kitchen, carried on the sound of Laura chopping sweet potatoes with a dull bread knife. Doris Vangler, Olita's cousin Duncan Vangler's wife, was in the kitchen as well, farther down the terra-cotta tile counter, undoing the tin foil over a casserole dish. As soon as she had forced the knife through the last sweet potato, Laura dropped the uneven chunks into the oil and brown sugar mixture that bubbled in the frying pan and switched the stove from low to high.

Doris Vangler reached over and switched the heat down to medium, saying, "That color seems so bright for a funeral. Do you think you ought to be using white potatoes?"

Laura set the lid on the pan. "No, I'm making sweet potatoes, not mashed potatoes. Is that Jeanine Stuart's casserole?" She wiped her hands on the striped dishcloth, "What is that smell?"

Doris drew off the foil, gazed at the casserole in the dish, then with a cry, she threw the foil into the sink and covered her mouth.

"It's bad! Oh my gracious goodness!"

Laura pressed the dishrag to her nose and looked closer. The yellow cheese was rubbery and fuzzy in some places, and the onion bits were transparent.

"Let me look at that dish." Her voice was muffled. With a finger, she tilted the edge up; the dish was cobalt blue with small red flowers across it, linked by a green vine.

"I don't believe this! She brought this to Fanny Davis' funeral over a week ago!"

Doris reeled back, halfway across the kitchen and threw her arm up, the fringe of her black shawl swinging out. "The disrespect. I see her now. She's out on the lawn. Out on the lawn next to Frank and Olita."

Laura looked out the window, framed with red and blue checked curtains.

Jeanine, redheaded, with her brown roots showing, had a hand up, pressing the shoulder of Frank, who was supporting Olita on his other arm. Laura turned the sweet potatoes down on low and lifted the lid to stir them. The sweet steam mixed with the sour scent of the casserole. Over the sound of the grease, she said, "She will notice if that dish is missing—and she will say something."

Doris humphed and muttered, "Fake red hair."

Laura put the lid back on the potatoes and looked around a moment before ripping a pear and apple embellished paper towel off the roll and laying the greasy spoon on it.

"We can't serve it. And we can't not serve it. She'll make a scene, and we just..can't—we're all here for Olita," she said.

"And we can't afford the distraction or God knows, David and Simone will be leaving with half the silver," said Doris. David and Simone were Olita's neighbors. They had four kids.

"If we serve that, this funeral will be infamous."

"Oh, we're not serving it. We'll serve those potatoes instead."

Doris seized the cobalt dish and upended it over the garbage can. The casserole didn't fall out until she whacked the glass on the edge of the garbage can a couple of times, then the congealed chicken, rice, and cheese slid out and plopped against the black plastic. Doris thunked the dish in the sink and squeezed a dollop of blue dish soap into her palm. She washed her hands, and then the dish, saying, "I'm mad. I'm so mad. The disrespect. We'll show her disrespect. How are those potatoes doing?"

Laura lifted the lid again and went to pick up the spoon, but Doris, drying the dish, said, "No, I think they can brown a little more. I want some tough bits."

Doris set the dry dish down next to the pale yellow bowl Laura had set out for the potatoes and hunched over, reading the labels on the bottles in the spice rack on the counter.

After a minute she plucked a bottle from it.

"What's that?" Laura asked, stirring the sweet potatoes.

"Cayenne," said Doris.

Thirty minutes later, the banquet was spread out on the heavy dining room table. The sweet potatoes were fried and mashed, mixed with cayenne and served in Jeanine's blue cobalt bowl next to the centerpiece of lilies and pussy willows. The tops of the pussy willow sprigs tangled in the unlit chandelier. Laura left it unlit, reasoning that the darkness would add to the appropriate morbidity of the event, and it would also keep the color of the orange potatoes from being noticed. As she set out the stack of plates and napkins at the end of the table, as Doris ushered people inside, Laura noticed an odd sour smell rising from a dish somewhere on the table, but the folks were streaming inside before she could investigate.

She moved out of the way and stood near the wall by Doris. Frank was leading Olita inside, and she was saying, "Oh, I can't eat, I can't possibly eat. I promised Jeanine I'd have her casserole, but, oh Frank, I can't quit crying."

Laura looked at Doris. Doris was coldly watching the table, arms crossed, hand idly catching and releasing the fringe of her shawl.

"I think something else was sour," Laura whispered to her. Doris dropped her fringe.

"What do you mean? What was it? Did you move it?" She asked.

"No! Everyone came in before I could see what it was!"

Doris made a sound in her throat and cut through the crowd to the table. Laura watched her. Doris filled a plate with a bite of every dish on the table except the sweet potatoes, gave Olita, who stood by the silverware, a one-armed hug, took two spoons and came back to Laura.

"This can't be happening," Doris said. "I opened everything when the girls brought it. Here, let's try these."

No morsel on the plate was sour.

Doris and Laura looked at each other.

After a few minutes, the crowd around the table thinned as people dispersed into clusters, merging by the walls or hanging beside the stuffed chairs.

Vera and Clara Ammons huddled in front of the china-filled glass cabinet near Doris and Laura. Laura heard Clara say, quite low, to Vera, "I thought Jeanine said she'd brought a casserole."

"I know," Vera said. "I heard her too! But this was in her dish." She sank the silver spoon into the sweet potatoes on her plate and put the spoon in her mouth. Doris and Laura watched as Vera stilled, and then swallowed.

"Oh my heavens, Clara, don't eat it. Don't eat it!" Vera's voice rose. "It's sour and it's so hot. It's so hot. Hold this, please." She gave her plate to Vera and rushed to the punch bowl.

Next to Laura, Doris whimpered.

"How is it sour?" Laura whispered. Doris lifted a shoulder, helpless.

"We can't possibly do anything."

A hushed rumor circulated among the funeral guests and the sweet potatoes were avoided.

By the end of the reception, Laura and Doris had not moved from their spot until it was time to start packing up the dishes. Jeanine came to claim hers. She picked it up and looked at it for a second, then said, "Oh! That's right, I brought sweet potatoes, not casserole. Silly me!"

Doris and Laura looked at each other through the pussy willow sprigs.

"Doris, honey, do you know where the tin foil is?" asked Jeanine. "I don't want to get this on my car seat."

Laura went with them to the kitchen, empty dishes stacked in her hands.

After the dish was wrapped and Jeanine left, Doris turned to Laura, "Oh my lord, oh my lord, oh my lord. My heart is pounding. Just pounding."

Laura looked up from loading this dishwasher. "I bet you anything she will bring that to Binky's funeral on Monday."

"What? Binky died?"

"He did. This morning. Poor man."

Doris let out a dry sob. "What are we coming to?"

Laura didn't answer as she rattled the silverware in the dishwasher, trying to get it all aligned.

Present Day

James Embree

The guilt and the rage nauseated me, giving a new distaste of the familiar roads. Each corner and each curve of the road felt to be miles away. The indifferent sun on my back was getting heavier. The establishments were unwelcome, the horizon I couldn't reach mocked me, I could hear it laughing. The false judgment and uncaring nature of every former acquaintance poured from their faces when they made my silhouette out. It'd been four years, but apparently not long enough.

I'd learned in the more recent years that feelings and endurances close to what I felt now were to blame for why I had been there at all, rotting away in such an institution. They'd been instilled in me at times in my life that were now a blur, and I'd thought they'd been dealt out and sent away but here they came and were, as if in my hands. Here they'd come again, entirely unforeseen at my new life's beginning, four hours earlier upon my release.

In the small town with under ten cops but more than five bars, the sole tavern that I'd never entered before was empty. The dimly-lit, noir-looking, uninviting bar was almost gravitational and I felt my psyche clear just as I sat down. The round and balding archetype at the register sighed as he folded up the apparently enthralling newspaper he read, and walked solemnly over to my seat.

Three servings of what I came there for then passed, and I was still present. I didn't feel present, but I was there, the uneven stool still shaking under me, the distrusting looks from the barkeep still scanning through me every minute or so. This point in time I'd looked him over just enough times. We'd seen each other around but never actually met. But now he and people like him all around would all know one thing more about me than I about them, and that much wouldn't change.

I stood up in a way that would make one think I'd just been deeply offended, nearly knocking over the chair I was in. Intoxicated, I almost gave it an apology. It was enough to get the attention of the man behind the bar, who now leapt at this new opportunity to give me a new glare, and it looked to be the coldest one he had. He was saving it for this moment.

The most exciting part of his day, I could still make out the stalking motion, coming at me from behind the bar, eyes locked. He hands me a receipt without a word or a smile or a nod. I looked dead at him, my gaze uneven and my mind erratic and rupturing. I proudly shed all withheld vindictiveness with the face I wore, all the undeserved patience of the day falling onto the floor, slipping into the gaps of the bar's disintegrating hardwood.

I saw many men in the past four years. Many looked like him. Some could've been him. I didn't know him. He could've been there. Now he's here, so am I. Maybe he was there twenty years ago. Or ten. He didn't look innocent. Not innocent enough. Even I looked more at ease upon my entrance.

I was no longer a man, a citizen, nor a person, my being completely rewritten. I had already embodied the role of a throwaway; I'd just fallen further. It should've been longer.

Upon reaching this point, I could feel that the absolute stranger and I had the same ideas, making this more unpleasant. Unwavering, he contemptuously barks "Can you pay for your drinks, sir?"

I looked down finally at the \$12 check. I held in my relief, knowing he was still there. I took out my wallet and with even more smugness took out his money. Abruptly it slammed down on the counter in front of his portly stomach, making a sound that I half expected to echo in this dark lonely cave of an establishment.

I got to hear that sigh of his yet again before he started talking. I almost mouthed the words along as he was saying “Alright man, I don’t think you ought to be coming back here.”

The word “here,” might have actually happened, I might never know. Somewhere between “ought,” and “coming,” I could feel the bar between us disappear as I lunged over it, and I had begun thrusting my fist in the barkeep’s vicinity as I took him down. We hit the ground, and the bones under the skin of my fingers would crack and shake when the fist slammed the hardwood, remarkably more solid behind the counter. Despite this I did get two or three shots in, which almost justified the next attempt.

That next attempt would get me what was probably a broken hand on the floor next to his head. Fathoming this, the man unleashed his own belligerence by slamming me against his side of the bar. This side greeted me with the sound of the glasses breaking and the shelves cracking, as well as possibly cracking my back. I looked up at the ceiling fan, going at a steady pace as I could hear the man thrust himself up and go to the other room, dialing what I assumed to be the police.

There was no effort to get up and run, to hit the man again, nor talk to him, nor to stop the call. It’d only be a matter of minutes now. The glass was digging into my skin through my shirt and my jeans. The lumber hit my head really hard. Black spots would accompany the whirring blades in their rhythmic pattern. My ears were ringing. I stared aimlessly, my senses felt shattered.

Newer generations had arrived. The arrival of new leaders, new wars, new tragedies, new men, children, mothers. Their wounds remained unhealed, it should’ve been longer. The black spots consumed the fan and the high pitch drowned out the opening door of the tavern.

Some of the pitch black drained from my sight to make out the two seats in front of me.

The color of everything reappeared when I looked out the window to once again see the clay outside, made blue by the moonlight.

The place I was in was beyond recognizable. Recognition dawned further when I noticed the solid red and blue flashing outside my own window, the colors following my windows’ reflection from the roof.

I looked at my wretched self, my face scuffed and unclean and exhausted. There was an all-too-known cold and metallic feeling around each of my wrists, each bump giving a modest clink. I didn’t dare look down, as I still couldn’t feel my hand, and wouldn’t try to move it, nor straighten my back. I laid my head back and peered out the rear window, looking at the black sky as though I were waiting for something. I found my whole body was stiff, and could see it remaining that way for some time.

I heard the familiar crackling of the fluorescent lights that my aging skin had grown so accustomed to as I laid on my cot. My hand had been poorly bandaged, but bandaged enough to keep my bones in place. My back continued to feel like wreckage. Eyes tired and bloodshot, I’d about given up on sleep when an officer approached my cell.

“Couple more minutes, we’ll give you your call.”

I hadn’t even the slightest idea of who to waste that call on. The woman I had abandoned and had replaced me in turn was one of few numbers I knew; succumbing to fury I pictured the man who now resided in my home. I thought about my daughter, the pregnant runaway, and her brother whose last words to me were that of spite and disgust.

In the root of the hopelessness that had consumed me for so long, and was now toying with me, I felt a new idea arise in me, one that I had dismissed for so long, even at my worst before deeds caught up with me, before my conviction.

It had been so long, and even though I could recall why that was, the weight of the memory had gradually declined over the years, especially considering what I had to plan for now.

I was unaccustomed to thinking about where I'd rather be, having avoided such thoughts for four years, and preferring escapism through books, or visits, at least in the beginning. I was losing the desire I had a day ago, to be back behind a screen-door trailer in Redmond Park with Holly, as I knew nothing would have been solved between us, even if I hadn't been replaced. I tried to envision myself somewhere with cooler air and fewer evidences of the life I've lived. Where I could maybe work and live quietly, and not be the mediator of the inconsistencies of others. It wasn't anything that couldn't be had, had I not been so preoccupied.

I heard them call my name, and I got up quicker than expected, a sharp jolt going through my back. I began to figure that it had been long enough, and I'd spent enough time in such surroundings, now ready to grasp new and different pursuits. Waves of relief held back a bit by rational expectations found their ways to wash over me as I took the phone in my hand. I recalled each number as I was dialing them, and stood there with the receiver in my ear, awaiting my brother's voice.

I See Fire

Evangeline Lubak

Red. Beautiful, ruby red...floating through the air. Dancing on the breeze. Flames licking at the dry wood hungrily, the curtains burnt black. The living room consumed by the lovely red, like roses.

There was a loud thud of a fist hitting a metal table. The fair girl jumped with a small “eep!” of surprise at the sound, jerking from her thoughts. Wide, innocent crimson eyes glanced up at the owner of the angry fist, an equally irritable looking man in the faded blue of a police officer’s uniform.

“Are you even listening to a word I say? Do you understand how much trouble you’re in?” he rumbled like thunder, his bushy eyebrows digging furrows in his forehead. The girl said not a word, just continuing to stare. He was a hairy man, almost furry, she mused, with his dark brown hair sticking up in all directions as if he had just rolled out of bed and his thick beard disguising a good amount of his face like a bandit’s mask.

The angry man’s partner, another cop with the same tired looking uniform but fairer brown hair clean cut and a younger face, laid a hand on his shoulder. “No need to be so hard on the kid, Mike. I’m sure she’s been through a lot.” His voice was calm, soothing perhaps. The good cop to this Mike’s bad cop. Mike grumbled before pulling away from the metal table and the girl sitting opposite them and standing upright again. His folded arms and still furrowed brows continued to radiate annoyance, but the girl did not see as her big eyes were directed to the second cop who continued to speak. “Look, isn’t there anything you can tell us about what happened?” He coaxed. The girl remained silent as before.

“You’ve only asked that same question five times already, Luke. Each time she hasn’t said a thing,” Mike muttered, casting a poorly hid glare at the girl, “If I were facing charges of major arson, I’d have spoken up by now! I think her silence is damning enough.”

"Too bad it's innocent until proven guilty, then," Luke retorted, turning back to the older man. He cast a glance at the girl before turning round and lowering his voice, "Besides, we don't have any evidence to pin her as the culprit."

"But she was at the scene of the crime!" Mike argued back. As the two men bickered, the girl looked up at the only source of natural light in the tiny, ashy grey interrogation room. There was only one small window with iron bars on it on the far wall, the only other connection to the outside world being a slate grey door, bolted shut, and a one way glass covering the rest of the wall across from her.

The cool air of early spring could be felt through the window. All the flowers would be blooming soon. Her favorite were the cherry blossoms...and the roses, blood red. Blood in the breeze, scarlet light jumping higher. The carmine conflagration serenaded by a dozen screams. Everything burned. A warm, tender glow kissed her skin as she watched the flames. Hot and bright as the sun as it devoured the kitchen and the hall closet. There was a dull roar of delight over the ear-tickling crackles and pops of sparks flying.

"Tia Matthews!" Once again, the girl was jolted from her memories as one of the cops called out to her. Blinking, she saw they were both watching her with hard eyes now. They had asked more questions no doubt. Oh bother. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself? About your family?" Luke, the one who had called her, asked. "You've said nothing but your name. Do you know how guilty you are looking right now?"

"How did that fire start? Who killed those people?!" Mike immediately followed up, unable to resist slamming his hands on the table and making Tia jump again. She tilted her head down to look at her thin hands, her skin ashy grey as the walls. Her sooty white hair fell from behind her shoulders to shroud her face like a ghostly veil.

"It was a dragon," she said in a soft, airy voice. Her answer was met with a sarcastic guffaw of laughter from Mike.

"Dragons don't exist. You'll have to try better than that, you little criminal," the hairy man belted out, his tone half amused and half irritated. As far as he was concerned, this interrogation, this whole investigation should have been over hours ago. He and his partner had responded to a call reporting thick, black smoke coming from a nearby cul de sac. One of the homes, belonging to a family of six, had been engulfed in flames. By the time they had arrived on the scene, the smoke from the fire hung over the entire block like a fog making it near impossible to see more than a few feet in front of them. When they reached the house...or what must have once been a house, there was only glowing embers, shining red in the haze, and coal black charred remains of the foundation of the building. All else was ash. They had little hope of finding survivors...until they heard a voice on the breeze, delicate and singing softly. Following it, they found a teenage girl rolling in the ashes, a childish delight in her ruby eyes as she sang.

"Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down!" Over and over again, she whispered the rhyme without ever noticing the police men. There was not a single burn or scratch marring her alabaster skin, not a single fair hair on her head the least bit singed. The blackened bones they unearthed from the ashes proved this girl was the only survivor. What they had first thought was a victim, they quickly began to suspect was a murderer. Yet, as the site of this terrible tragedy was shifted through, no evidence, no tool which could have started the fire could be found. No trail of gasoline or even matches. It was an impossible arson, a perfect crime.

“If you don’t want to end up in jail the rest of your life, you better give us something, some information explaining how this all happened.” Luke’s voice was still attempting at civility, but clearly with a very serious intent. Tia did not look away from her fingers, moving to play with the edge of her dusty shirt.

“It was a dragon,” she repeated in a whisper. Mike growled, adding even more to his beast like visage.

“Do you think we’re idiots?! There’s no such thing as dragons! You set that fire, didn’t you? Killed your entire family and danced on their graves,” Luke once again placed a hand on his partner’s shoulder to try and calm him down, but the older man angrily shrugged him off, “I don’t know how you did it, but I know you did! It’s only a matter of time before you slip up.”

Tia looked up to stare out the tiny window again. She could just barely see the trees through the bars. An emerald green with tiny pink buds, just waiting for the chance to bloom. Auburn blooms, flickering in the wind. Tongues of flame reaching eagerly towards the sapphire sky, climbing towards the sun like the vines of the garden. The garden looked better in sleek, chalky obsidian, anyway. Nothing compared to the beautiful, beautiful red, though. The garage, the last of the house, gave a wheeze and a groan before collapsing in a cloud of scarlet and ebony.

“Fire, fire burning bright,” she murmured, “Nothing lovelier in mine sight...” Luke looked to Mike with a worried gaze.

“Do you think she’s mentally disturbed? Might explain all this nonsense about dragons,” he said lowly as he leaned in towards the other cop. Mike gave a grunt, pushing himself up from his leaning position over the metal table before folding his arms.

“Frankly, I don’t give two cents if she’s whacked out of her mind. As long as I can make the arrest and close this damn case, she can be completely looney.” He cast a scowl at the girl still staring at the tiny portal to the outside. “You heard what she said...I think that’s as good of a confession as we’re going to get.” Luke shook his head, his face scrunched up in clear discontent.

“Something’s still bothering me...” he gave a sigh, “I guess you’re right, though.” He took a step towards the girl, no more than a grey wraith in her chair. “All right, Tia Matthews, time to go.”

The girl did not move a muscle before slowly casting her eyes towards the table before her. Gazing at the shiny metallic surface, she studied her warped, grey visage. Pretty scarlet eyes...like the pretty scarlet flames. A ruby glow reflected off the metal, followed by a chorus of gasps. Screams swelled like a symphony with the heat as the flames burned brighter, eating at the grey walls and blue uniforms. Crackling embers and cries for help, for salvation tickled at her ears. With a little toothy grin, the girl traced out “Tia Matthews” in the collecting ash on the table. Slowly and deliberately, she smudged out several letters from the end of the second word. There was a thunderous roar, of the flames, of the one who brought flames. She glanced one last time at the remaining letters before giving a giggle. T-I-A-M-A-T. Fire flashing in her carmine eyes, she at last rose from her chair like a queen from her throne and gazed up at a pair of matching ruby eyes in the thick black smoke. She held up one ashy hand to meet the ridged obsidian scales of the beast’s nose, lovingly stroking her pet. The screams of terror and gasps of death were barely audible over the roar of the flames.

“Dragons don’t exist,” Tiamat whispered, reveling in her world of blood red beauty.

Parties Weren't Meant To Last

Michael Marsh

As he took a long drag off of his cigarette, the lone parking attendant exuded an air of the strange. His unkempt hair and glazed eyes lent themselves to the comparative oddity of his fluorescent yellow uniform against the gray parking garage. The blank expression on his face combined with the ringlets of Marlboro smoke wreathed around his head to give him the appearance of a stoic thinker. Standing on the curb like a pedestal, he thought himself to look like a solitary marble statue in a concrete temple to the automobile. Flicking at his cigarette and snorting sharply, he breathed out a sigh of exhaustion and menthol-laced smoke. He quickly scanned the immediate area and spat on the asphalt of the driveway, too tired to care who might see anyway.

The day had been a long one, and it seemed that the night would follow suit. He looked up the driveway and begged for mercy from the clock above the elevators, but there would be none. It was only eight o'clock, four hours to go before the gala ended. He sighed again and thought of the number of bowties and pearl necklaces he had counted over the course of the day. The score was about sixty-two to fifty-five, bowties. As the parking attendant pictured himself as one of the tuxedoed men so far upstairs, he was interrupted when the elevator sprang to life. The ding of its bell resounded through the empty temple, announcing the departure of one of many zealots.

A girl in a black and white striped dress appeared at the far end of the driveway, stepping out of the elevator while searching through a small white purse for her keys. The attendant drew a deep breath and studied her as she walked past. He thought she was the color of a strong coffee with a shot of Irish cream, and the sight of her elicited a similar effect in him. As the girl dug around in her purse, the attendant noticed that she dropped a small

orange and white striped lipstick. It rolled down the incline of the exit driveway and came to a stop at the curb under the attendant's feet, and he stooped to pick it up.

The label read "Sunset Secrets," a gaudy shade of orange like the color of a well-used highlighter. The puzzled attendant wondered why she hadn't picked a color more fitting to her dress, and rolled the lipstick around in his hand. "Hey, you dropped..." he trailed off as her black stilettos moved at a steadily increasing clip while she looked for her car. Before he could call out again he saw that she wasn't dropping her things, but throwing them. A compact mirror and a cellphone shattered on the concrete as the girl vanished from the attendant's view. He rolled the lipstick in his hand once more and stepped off of the curb to return it, but was stopped by a car coming down the driveway. With a mechanized growl, a white Jaguar XJ 5.0 swooped around the corner towards him. Glass crunched as the Jag rolled over the cellphone, and the attendant noticed the discarded items had orange cases matching the lipstick in his hand.

Twisting his face in a less than half-hearted grin, the parking attendant prepared to address the car now rolling towards him and the exit of the garage. He strained his face to widen the smile, giving him the look of a deranged clown without make-up. Too exhausted to offer genuine consideration he mumbled "Hey, uh, I think you dropped this," and offered the lipstick to the woman. "Oh, I don't need it, it's not mine," she replied as she drew a black pack of cigarettes out of the white purse. She took out a prescription pill bottle as well, glancing at the label, and popped a small green tablet into her mouth. Confused, the smile fell from the attendant's face and he slipped the lipstick into his pocket, shrugging slightly. She had slight features and looked like a caricature of a demure French woman as she jammed the filter end of her cigarette into a long black holder she took from the purse. The cigarettes were strange black ones that burned with a yellow smoke and smelled of cloves.

The woman then said something that he didn't catch and the parking attendant asked, "What?" then exhaled and spat on the ground, narrowly missing the side of the white Jag now parked in front of him. Taking another drag, the attendant pondered what shade of beige his viscous brown phlegm would have rendered the side panel. The driver glanced at the ground and then back up at the fluorescent yellow form looming over her. She stared at the attendant for a moment, breathed a sigh of probable disgust, and turned to get her purse from the passenger seat.

"I said I think I've lost my ticket," she repeated and pulled a fat money-clip from the purse. It appeared to be entirely one hundred dollar bills, sporting the newest design fresh from the mint. Standing over the window of the car, the attendant could see there was a separate clip filled with English pounds that was twice as fat.

"Oh, um...that's okay. I'll let you go," He mumbled again and she smiled, passing him a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. He took it without noticing how much it was worth.

"Thanks, you're a real southern gentleman. Not like those guys upstairs. Say, what's your name?" she asked, tipping down the edge of her sunglasses with the two fingers holding her cigarette.

"Uh, P-Patrick, Patrick Parks, miss," he stammered as he became transfixed upon the girl's smoldering amber eyes.

"Parks, huh? Like Rosa?" she smiled and eyed him again.

"Yeah, like Rosa," he replied.

When Patrick looked down and realized he was holding a one-hundred-dollar bill, he sheepishly offered it back and said, "I-I can't take this, miss. Parking's only twenty bucks." The girl smiled again, waving him off, and took a puff from her odd cigarette. As the girl turned to shove the money-clip back into her purse, Patrick noticed that

the invitation to the gala on the dashboard was addressed to a man. He examined it as much as he could before she turned around and noticed that not only was it addressed to a man, but one of the biggest big-wigs attending the event.

Patrick recognized "Mr. Jack Gardner--Noble, Inc." as one of the highest names on the VIP list he had crumpled in his pocket. It was only two or three names below Luther Noble himself, the CEO holding the gala for his new housing charity, Noble Deeds. "She has no wedding ring on and she's alone in the car, so she probably isn't his wife," he thought.

"Where's Mr. Gardner tonight, miss?" he probed, pointing at the invitation on the dash.

"Hmm? Oh, that. He's probably still upstairs somewhere, demanding that they let him in. I stole this from him in the lobby after he tried to hit on me while his date was in the bathroom," she declared with blasé indifference, waving it around with two fingertips like a dainty handkerchief and tossing it into the back seat.

"Uh...o-kay..." the parking attendant was utterly puzzled, assuming she was joking.

"So...you gonna rat on me or what?" she asked, tipping down her sunglasses again.

"N-No. Of course not." He stuttered out.

"Good boy, Patty," she purred and checked her watch. "Uh...did you really—" he began to ask but she interrupted him with a wave of her hand.

"Listen, I don't have much time, Patrick, so I have a question for you. It'll be one of the most important questions of your life. Do you want to come with me? Do you want to live a little before you die?" she leaned in and whispered to him.

"Um...what? Come with you where?" he asked, baffled at the sudden proposition.

"I don't know, yet. Paris? Italy maybe. I've always wanted to go to Italy." She smiled and took off her dark sunglasses, unleashing the full power of her entrancing eyes on him.

"But I-I don't even know your name... Who are you? Am I dreaming or something?" he blurted and fidgeted unsure of what to do. The elevator's bell rang out once again, signaling that they wouldn't be alone much longer.

"Nope. This is real life, and you know what they say, don't you? Life is a party, and parties weren't meant to last." She laughed and took a drag from her cigarette.

"I...uh...I dunno..." he mumbled anxiously.

"Hurry up, Patrick. They're almost here." she whispered in a brisk tone.

"Uh...um...but...who are you? Could you at least tell me your name?" The anxious parking attendant begged.

"Not until you get in." She laughed, melodic and musical.

With another ding, the door of the elevators slid open and a cacophony of angry voices could be heard down the exit driveway. Patrick couldn't understand all of them but caught snippets such as, "Goddammit, I can't believe this!" and a woman sobbing. The furious crowd of five shuffled out of the crowded elevator like a pack of mad dogs, barking and nipping at each other. There was an older man who looked to be British, a younger man closer to Patrick's age, a younger blonde woman in a gaudy orange dress, a flustered concierge, and Patrick's parking supervisor.

"What the hell kinda operation you people runnin' here, dammit? My invitation gets stolen and they just tell me to fuck off! All the money I gave to this goddam charity!" the younger man in a tuxedo asked, jabbing with his finger at the concierge the British man had dragged from the lobby.

"Yes, I too would like to know what in blazes is going on around here! My wife's purse was stolen with our car keys inside! How in bloody hell are we to leave?" the older British man bellowed, his gray mustache growing furious.

"Hey! That's it right there! Hey, you, stop her!" the sobbing woman screamed to Patrick.

Patrick's eyes widened as the angry mass quickly shuffled towards him. He looked to the girl, who was laughing uncontrollably; and back to the furious group quickly gaining on him. He made his choice, groped for the handle of the Jaguar's door, flung it open, and jumped in.

"I'm Sophie." she smiled and kicked in the gas pedal, laughing like a banshee as the smoke from the burning rubber billowed into the faces of the mad mob.

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